Community protocols for engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities
This artwork was created by Gilimbaa to represent how Churches of Christ in Queensland supports those in our care. The individual and their family are at the centre of everything we do. Our mission of bringing the light of Christ expands out to their extended family and the wider community.

The string game is a traditional game of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and is played by boys and girls, as well as adults. In this artwork, the string game represents the pathways and connections that link and lead to the individual we are supporting.

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Introduction

This guide has been developed as a tool for Churches of Christ in Queensland staff for engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities. This will provide staff with practical steps and guidance to ensure that respectful relationships are developed which are based on culturally appropriate interactions.

It is important to note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities identify as two distinct and separate entities and protocols for engagement may vary accordingly.

Please keep in mind this is not an exhaustive list of actions and should you have any questions please connect with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff member or the Inclusion and Diversity Team within the Human Resources group.

Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DATSIP)

DATSIP is the state government lead agency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in Queensland. They work across whole of government but are also a valuable resource for the Non-government sector in connecting with communities. DATSIP staff live and work in these communities and may also be Traditional or Historical Owners. They will have invaluable advice to support your visit so please pay close attention and follow any directions given.

You can find out more about DATSIP on their website: datsip.qld.gov.au

Information relating to DATSIP regional offices and contact information can be located at: datsip.qld.gov.au/people-communities/regional-centres
Who is a Traditional Owner?

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people consider the lands and waters they have traditional affiliation and responsibility for as their ‘country’. Throughout Australia, clan and family groups as well as individuals hold the responsibility to look after or ‘care for country’.

Senior people in the community, who are responsible for their traditional land and waters, are referred to as ‘Traditional Owners’. An ‘Acknowledgment of Traditional Owners’ is an important mark of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and can be given by anyone.¹

Who is considered an Elder?

An Aboriginal (or Torres Strait Islander) Elder is someone who has gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore, and who has permission to disclose knowledge and beliefs. In some instances Aboriginal people above a certain age will refer to themselves as Elders.²

When should I call someone Aunty or Uncle?

This is a term used by individuals as a respectful acknowledgement of elders. You should be invited by someone to refer to them as Aunty or Uncle before doing so as a sign of respect.

Aboriginal Communities

A core component of Churches of Christ in Queensland’s engagement with Aboriginal communities will be to ensure that all staff participate in cultural awareness training prior to engaging with community via e-learning modules and face-to-face sessions. This will ensure that staff are appropriately informed of relevant cultural sensitivities and potential issues as part of engagement. These steps will provide guidance to Churches of Christ in Queensland staff with a practical guide for engagement.

Steps for engagement:

1. Connect with internal Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff that may have travelled to the region previously or have existing relationships/contacts
2. Contact the nearest DATSIP regional office to advise of your planned travel dates and business purpose within community
3. Identify from DATSIP relevant community leaders or council members (more relevant to discrete communities) that you should also meet with as part of your visit
4. Once travel is confirmed contact the appropriate contact person, council or Elders a few days prior to your departure to ensure it is still appropriate to visit. Matters such as Sorry Business may make it inappropriate for your planned travel to proceed, it is considered highly disrespectful and inappropriate to visit community during these times without the relevant permissions


5. When you meet with leaders, Elders or DATSIP staff clarify if there are any issues you need to be made aware of during your visit.

6. Ensure any commitments or agreements made to community during your visit are followed through and that you regularly report back and connect. Failure to do so will result in decreased community trust and confidence and you may not be invited back!

It is important to note that these steps will occur more naturally over time as relationships are sustained and trust is developed.

Please also refer to the DATSIP protocol documents for engagement with Aboriginal communities at:


It is common that you will need to seek council permission to be on country in discrete communities, some remote communities, Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait Islands.

**Discrete Communities**

A discrete Indigenous community refers to a geographic location, bounded by physical or cadastral (legal) boundaries, and inhabited or intended to be inhabited by predominantly Indigenous people, with housing or infrastructure that is either owned or managed on a community basis.

In Queensland these include Aurukun, Cherbourg, Coen, Doomadgee, Hope Vale, Kowanyama, Lockhart River, Mapoon, Mornington Island, Mossman Gorge, Napranum, Northern Peninsula Area (includes Bamaga, Injino, New Mapoon, Seisia and Umagico), Palm Island, Pormpuraaw, Woorabinda, Wujal, Yarrabah.

You MUST connect with local council before travel to these locations.

**Sorry Business**

Sorry Business is a period of mourning in both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures after an individual passes away. It affects families and loved ones it affects work and can last from days to weeks. An individual’s name can also not be spoken during this period. A Churches of Christ in Queensland staff member is able to utilise the provisions within cultural leave during these times.

Cultural/Ceremonial leave is available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in the first instance as three (3) days paid leave. An additional five (5) days is also available unpaid upon request.

**Torres Strait Islander Communities**

The Torres Strait Islands are a truly remarkable and beautiful location. Although our organisation currently has no services in this region is important that staff develop an understanding of protocols for this unique location.

1. Connect with Churches of Christ in Queensland staff that may have travelled to that region previously or have existing relationships/contacts.

2. Contact the nearest DATSIP regional office to advise of your planned travel dates and business purpose within community.

3. Identify from DATSIP relevant community leaders or council members (more relevant to discrete communities) that should also meet with as part of your visit.

4. Once travel is confirmed contact the appropriate contact person, council or Elders a few days prior to your departure.
to ensure it is still appropriate to visit. Matter such as Sorry Business may make it inappropriate for your planned travel to proceed, it is considered highly disrespectful and inappropriate to visit community during these times without the relevant permissions.

5. When you meet with leaders, Elders or DATSIP staff clarify if there are any issues you need to be made aware of during your visit.

6. Ensure any commitments or agreements made to community during your visit are followed through and that you regularly report back and connect. Failure to do so will result in decreased community trust and confidence and you may not be invited back!


### Tombstone Openings

Tombstone ceremonies are a distinctive feature of Torres Strait Islander culture practiced both on the islands and by Islander communities living on the mainland. Following the arrival in 1871 of the London Missionary Society (an event known as the Coming of the Light) the majority of Torres Strait Islanders converted to Christianity. Islanders syncretised their own Indigenous practices with Christianity (discussed in module one of cultural awareness training).

The Tombstone Opening, when the headstone is unveiled, takes place three years after the death of a relative. The Tombstone Opening is a sign that the spirit of the deceased has joined the other ancestors and marks the end of the mourning period. The Tombstone ceremony brings together song, dance, the visual arts and the preparation and display of food in a ‘flamboyant and extravagant ceremony’. It may not be appropriate for our organisation to conduct business during these periods.

### Other general considerations

It is important to note that communities (particularly discrete communities) can feel overwhelmed by state and federal government interventions. So the key to your engagement being successful is whatever your service or program area that you seek community buy-in and community ownership as appropriate as a core component of your approach. This will gain both you and our organisation respect and credibility as well as the potential to diversify into other opportunities into the future.

### Wet season

During November to April each year roads and various locations across North Queensland and Far North Queensland cannot be reached via road due to heavy rain and may only be accessible by plane. This is important to note for planning purposes for travel and aiming to engage during dry season for face-to-face meetings.
Travel across Torres Strait Islands

The main services hub for the Torres Strait Islands is located on Thursday Island. Majority of government and non-government services are located here. Torres Strait has three levels of council including:

- Torres Shire Council (Thursday Island- local council): torres.qld.gov.au
- Torres Strait Regional Council (Outer Islands): tsirc.qld.gov.au
- Torres Strait Regional Authority (federal authority): tsra.gov.au

Each of these bodies has its own governance including a CEO and Mayor. When travelling to the outer islands each of these bodies have their own Mayor or representative.

You MUST have permission to visit the outer islands.

It’s important to be prepared as travel to the islands is only available via charter flights which can be very costly! There may be an opportunity to share a charter flights with other government agencies so make sure you connect with DATSIP beforehand.

Travel to Torres Strait Islands is available from Cairns-Horn Island via Qantas link. There are then two ferry companies on Horn Island who can get you across the 15minute trip to Horn Island. More can be learned about the region via tsra.gov.au/the-torres-strait

Don’t be afraid to ask questions if you’re ever unsure. Your actions and cultural capability during engagement WILL determine future relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities so provide them with the respect and regard necessary.

The Churches of Christ in Queensland Stakeholder Directory may also assist you in connecting with appropriate contacts from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This is saved on the shared directory and RAP Sharepoint page.

About Churches of Christ in Queensland

Churches of Christ in Queensland has a significant presence in Queensland, Victoria and Vanuatu with over 200 services in more than 100 communities, positively impacting thousands of lives each year. We operate a range of missional and community care services to assist families, the elderly and people in need through church communities and our care services groups operated through Churches of Christ Care and Churches of Christ Housing Services.